



Neptuna on her side (Lewis Collection)

The Territory Remembers

The Neptuna Porthole's life as a Coffee table

By Wendy James

One of the commercial ships in Darwin Harbour at the time of the first bombing raid by the Japanese on 19 February 1942 was the MV Neptuna. It was owned by the Burns Philp Company. The vessel was bombed, strafed, caught fire, exploded and sank beside Stokes Hill Wharf.

When the ship exploded, an extraordinary thing happened; one of its portholes was blasted off with such force it hurtled upwards and landed on the hill overlooking the Port. Many knew it existed. Many searched for it, but somehow it mysteriously disappeared.

Our family has strong links with Darwin. Our parents, Stan and Poppy Secrett arrived with my brother John and myself in 1937. They fell in love with the lifestyle and vowed never to leave. A baby sister was born, Lorilee. However, in December 1941 all women, children and the infirm were ordered to evacuate the town; an attack on Darwin was imminent. My mother, a strong-willed beautiful woman refused to leave but had no option. We boarded the MV *Koolinda* and sailed to Perth, always on the alert for mines in the sea or attack from the air.

We disembarked with little money and a few clothes in a string bag then had to face the reality of life as refugees in our own country. My father was co-opted into the Civilian Construction Corp for the duration of the war. He was working near the wharf when the first bombs fell and ran for his life to find an empty slit trench.

The war ended on 15 August 1945. Six weeks later our family returned to Darwin, united at last and back in the town we loved, although there was not much of it left.

Huge convoys of trucks were moving the armed forces south to be demobbed. One night we were woken by a loud banging downstairs. The Town Major was at the door holding a large hessian bag. In it was the *Neptuna* porthole.¹ He was leaving the next day on the last convoy. He had kept the porthole hidden under his bed because he believed it belonged in Darwin and entrusted it to our family to make sure it stayed here. He stressed that it must remain out of sight for two years.

In 1947 the porthole was transformed into an elegant coffee table with simple brass legs to support it. The porthole became an integral part of our family life. All six children, John, Wendy, Lorilee, twins Peter and Robert and Holly remember cleaning the brass and polishing its glass window when it was their turn on the Saturday morning cleaning roster. It was not a job we all enjoyed but there was always satisfaction when the polished brass shone, which is probably why we remember it with such clarity.

Our father died in 1955 and life for our mother and the younger children became very difficult. However, she kept the porthole until 1974 when it was gifted to the Navy. Captain Eric Johnston made plans for it to be installed in a small concrete building called the Cell Bar used by naval officers as a recreation facility, situated near Stokes Hill Wharf.

These plans were postponed when once again disaster struck Darwin. Cyclone Tracy swept through the city and its surrounds leaving behind destruction and a largely homeless population in its wake. The porthole was temporarily lost in the stone rubble of Naval Headquarters. It was eventually recovered and in 1976 was formally installed in the Cell Bar by Captain Tos Dadswell, taking its place alongside portholes salvaged from naval ships sunk in 1942. My mother and the Secrett family descendants attended the brief ceremony.

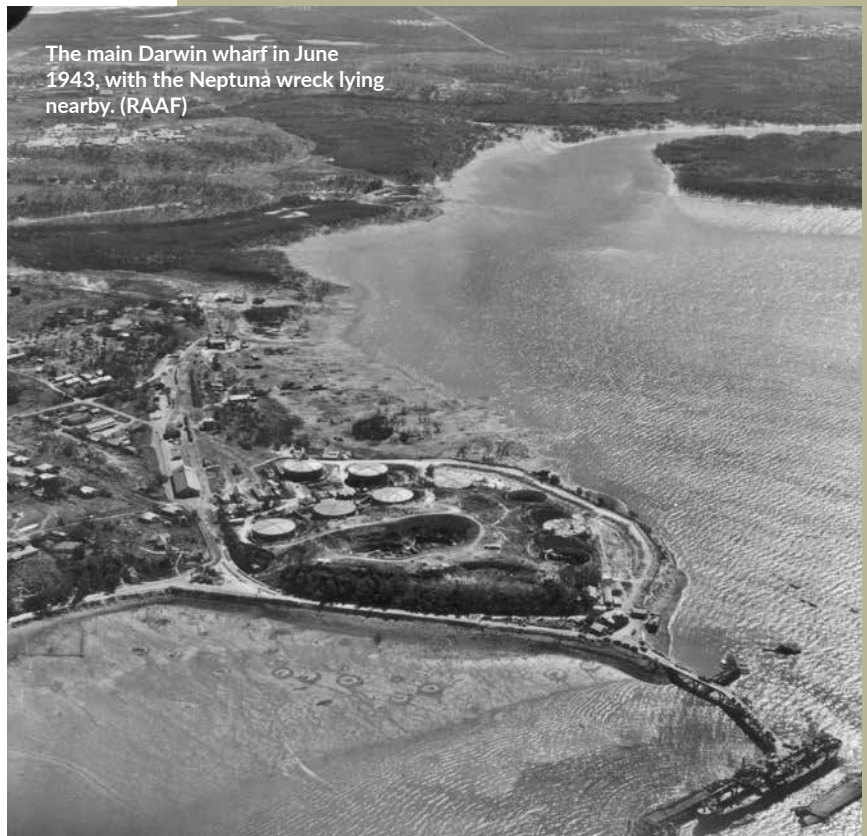
Our mother Poppy died in 1978 having lived an eventful and courageous life in the place she loved. I maintained a watchful eye on the Cell Bar, believing that small museum was not a permanent fixture. I wrote to Commander John Navin RAN in December 2014 expressing my concerns and asked if the porthole could be returned to the family to be offered to the Darwin Military Museum. My concerns were overtaken with excitement and relief when I learnt that the contents of the Cell Bar had been taken to the Museum in January 2015 to be included in the *HMAS Melville* display, including the *Neptuna* porthole.

For us it is a fitting memorial to our mother Poppy Secrett and I know she would be proud and pleased with its final resting place.

Notes

1. Major Jim Davis, 'the military equivalent of the civil mayor: 'In Darwin', *The Mail* (Adelaide, S.A.), 24 November 1945, p.4.

Wendy James OAM came to the Northern Territory as a small child in 1937. She has been evacuated from Darwin twice, once in 1941 just prior to the bombing of Darwin and once in 1975 after Cyclone Tracy. She has lived most of her life in Darwin, is married, and has four sons and eight grand children. She was the first Convenor of the NT Government's Women's Advisory Committee; is a life member of the Penguin Club of Australia; and has been awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for her "service to the community through the promotion of women's issues in the Northern Territory".



The main Darwin wharf in June 1943, with the *Neptuna* wreck lying nearby. (RAAF)



The *Neptuna* porthole (James Family)